

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 16 (2024)

Derrida à l'oeuvre: "Doing Theory" Against Inequalities



Derrida à l'oeuvre: "Doing Theory" Against Inequalities

Sara Nyhlén, Katarina Giritli-Nygren

Copyright © 2024



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Derrida à l'oeuvre: "Doing Theory" Against Inequalities

Sara Nyhlén and Katarina Giritli-Nygren

This issue of *Synthesis* explores Jacques Derrida's work on nation, gender and race in relation to the current ethical and political studies of in/equalities in the field of social sciences. The current socio-political situation in Europe, including Sweden, is marked by increasing tensions around issues such as immigration, identity politics, economic inequality, and rising nationalism. These dynamics create a fractured landscape where traditional modes of understanding are insufficient to capture the complexities of the present. In times where deconstruction has come to be colonised by right-wing politics and described as destructive of Western culture and subversive of Western civilisation, we argue that it is important to put Derrida back (in)to political work. In such a context, theory, especially as developed by Jacques Derrida, becomes crucial. Derrida's deconstruction provides a framework for interrogating the binary oppositions—such as us vs them, native vs foreigner—that underpin much of the discourse in Europe today. His emphasis on the instability of meaning and the necessity of questioning established structures allows us to unpack the underlying assumptions driving contemporary political conflicts. Many of the upcoming neo-nationalist movements that operate under the guise of defending democracy, are in fact undermining its core principles. These discourses frame exclusionary policies, xenophobia, and cultural essentialism as necessary measures to protect national sovereignty and identity. In this climate, deconstructive strategies are urgently

needed to expose the contradictions within these movements. Jacques Derrida's deconstructive thinking—anti-instrumental as it is—might still be used as a powerful tool for dismantling the false binaries and rhetorical sleights of hand that justify these exclusionary ideologies. It might even be the case that the situation of today demands deconstructive thinking to be politically instrumentalised to enable a questioning of instrumental reason. A strategic tool, following the argument of Gayatri Spivak when she coined the concept of “strategic essentialism” (2004), often requires that we create a political position from where to speak; however, we also need to remember that such a position reproduces the field of us and others, as there could never be one political position from where to speak.

By questioning the presumed stability of concepts like ‘nation,’ ‘identity,’ and ‘democracy,’ deconstruction reveals how these terms are often mobilized to defend anti-democratic agendas. Engaging deconstruction in this context helps to disrupt narratives that disregard the lives of migrants, minorities, and marginalised groups, by showing how such discourses conceal violence beneath claims of democratic defense. It becomes a critical intervention that challenges neo-nationalist claims to authority, revealing the inconsistencies in their rhetoric and advocating for more inclusive and ethical politics that resists the erosion of democratic values. By applying Derrida's theoretical lens, we can engage with the nuances and ambiguities that are often overlooked in public debates, pushing for a more inclusive and critical approach to understanding Europe's current challenges.

The impact of Derrida's work in the present, nearly twenty years since his death, is growing, even in areas of research that did not initially engage his thought. For instance, the rising interest in the use of the spectral as a conceptual metaphor in the field of sociology and, more recently, criminology, exemplifies a spectral turn in these fields, which relates Derrida's concept of Spectrality, introduced in *Specters of Marx* (1994) to ongoing debates about the targeting of minority groups or the criminalisation and minoritising of specific ethnic collectivities. In sociology, this concept has been used to analyze how historical traumas, injustices, or unresolved conflicts continue to shape contemporary societies. Spectrality helps sociologists understand the persistence of colonial legacies, racial discrimination, or ideological ghosts from past regimes that still influence national identities, social inequalities, or political movements (e.g. Nyhlén, Skott and Giritli Nygren “Haunting the Margins”). It provides a lens to explore how historical memories and unresolved issues of the past “haunt” present social structures, influencing collective behaviour and political discourses in ways that aren't always

explicitly acknowledged. For example, how colonial histories continue to affect former colonies through neo-colonial economic relationships, identity crises, and cultural memory. By incorporating, for example, Derrida's ideas of *spectrality*, sociology gains tools for exploring how the past continues to shape present realities, and how societal efforts at self-preservation can inadvertently lead to self-destruction, offering a richer, more nuanced critique of contemporary social and political life.

Another example of how Derrida's philosophical work has been used as a tool for ethical and political critique of social and political injustice, demonstrating its considerable impact, are the ongoing discussions about conditional and unconditional hospitality. Derrida's work on hospitality invites us to critically reflect on how societies manage the arrival of the "other," whether in terms of immigrants, refugees, or marginalized groups. It helps unpack the power relations embedded in acts of welcoming and exclusion, revealing how ethical ideals of openness are constantly negotiated with political, legal, and cultural conditions. Sociologists studying multiculturalism, for example, use the concept to critique how policies of integration often place conditional demands on immigrants and minority groups to adopt the dominant culture's norms. By framing hospitality as conditional, the host society exerts power over the guest, determining the terms under which they are allowed to stay. In this context, hospitality becomes not just about welcoming strangers, but about negotiating the boundaries of belonging, identity, and social cohesion. Derrida's emphasis on the impossibility of achieving *pure* hospitality—that hospitality always involves a form of control or exclusion—can serve to reveal the hidden power relations that shape integration policies and social inclusion efforts in practice.

The contributed articles engage ideas from the works of Derrida and seek to apply these as a way of doing theory against inequalities. Although they take up quite different parts of Derrida's works, they all center around themes of human relationality and the ambiguities of the political form. In "Reading the Inheritance of the Unforgivable with Derrida: 'One Nation, One Language, One State'." And 'One Religion,'" Ebru Öztürk explores the consequences of the implementation of the Latin alphabet in Turkey in 1928 and the imposed homogenisation processes that propelled the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish nation-state. The change was reinforced by a prevailing apprehension that the existence of linguistic diversity within the nation could potentially pose a threat to the formation of a cohesive national identity. Departing from an analysis of a letter authored by Jacques Derrida during his

sojourn in Istanbul in 1997, Öztürk explores how his concepts of 'inheritance,' 'autoimmunity,' 'democracy to come,' 'sovereignty,' and 'forgiving the unforgivable' hold profound relevance for the analysis of the aporias that emerged in the wake of the transition from the Ottoman Empire, marked by processes of Turkification. She argues that Derrida's conception of democracy's autoimmunity and inheritance can offer significant perspectives on the persistent political impasses in Turkish democracy, which is "never present but is always deferred" (Derrida *Specters of Marx*).

Derrida's conception of democracy's autoimmunity is further explored in the article "The Spectropolitics of the Swedish People's Home: Tracing the 'no longer' and the 'not yet' in the Swedish 2022 Election Campaign," by Katarina Giritli Nygren, Sara Nyhlén and Sara Skott. The authors examine the role of spectralising power in the uprising of punitive populism, revealing the election as the fulcrum by which populism tilts politics, identifying a series of symptoms typical of the autoimmune disorder. Through the spectre of safety and via the spectralisation of individuals engaged in the so-called gang criminality, the Swedish People's Home [*det Svenska folkhemmet*] assumes a spectralising power in politics, both left and right, that produces a punitive populism calling for the persecution and exorcism of certain racialised groups. The analysis shows how the electoral campaign forecloses the future of democratic practices and the transformation of Swedish politics from the perspective of all, including those who are misrepresented as the less than human, the less than citizen. By proleptically criminalising these bodies, these political discourses immunize democracy from what is fundamental to democratic practices, namely, its openness to the changes and transformations of its demos and to the collectivities and individuals who inhabit it. In this process, the authors argue, democracy no longer has the structure of a promise and its open-ended future is lost.

In "Stones (and) Touching," Anders E. Johansson asks us to question and deconstruct the words and concepts which we also love, or consider to be unquestionably good, like friendship. He argues that the concepts of 'autoimmunity' and 'pharmakon' help us understand how what is supposed to protect us can also harm us, by not accidentally effecting undesirable consequences. It is this aspect of Derrida's work that Johansson discusses in his essay. His insistence on death *in* life, technology *in* spirit, difference *in* togetherness, and, thus, the importance of remaining within the aporetic and not blindly abiding by the solutions offered by those who see themselves as belonging to a benevolent community of rational human subjects who can control the consequences of their decisions with methods of calculation.

Johansson shows how we need to resist any nostalgia for lost origins when we try to think forward. His argumentation is thus in line with what Silvana Carotenuto argued during the 8th *Derrida Today Conference* earlier this year, namely the need to deconstruct the western lineage of friendship. Friendship has been instrumentalised for the purpose of the modern empire, just as it has been used in order to justify the modern empire, and it is the responsibility of our times to write a different story of friendship, that produces the question of the political *otherwise*.

In the roundtable discussion “Dealing with Double Binds: Letters on Derrida’s *Geschlecht III*, Swedishness and the Animal Rationale,” Anders E. Johansson, Samuel Edquist, Katarina Giritli Nygren, Sara Nyhlén and Emelie Pilflod Larsson discuss the double binds of Swedish nationalism and contemporary environmental politics, asking whether it is possible to understand what nationalism is without asking the question of what humanity is. They draw inspiration from *Geschlecht III* in two senses: first, in terms of form and in allowing poetry to be an object of analysis by reading the lyrics of a famous Swedish song, and secondly, through acknowledging the link between poetry, nationalism and ideology. Derrida was not only interested in the dividing lines between different kinds of people, but also in the construction of the human and how it gives rise to the notion of *the other*: non-human animals, nature and the dehumanised human and the constitution of an anthropocentric subject. They argue that Derrida’s reflections on the human-animal relation do not constitute a consolidated position but a position from which it is possible to deconstruct hierarchies built around otherness, thus challenging the anthropocentric paradigm.

Emelie Pilflod Larsson further explores the theme of human relationality in her essay “The Animal in Closed-loop Food Innovations: Mythologization, Technology and Relations.” She sets out to re-narrate the violent footprints that *are* left in this form of food productions—footprints that fundamentally alter human-animal relations—and redefines what it means to be human. Following Derrida’s argument in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, positing that the animal is pivotal in the construction of humanity, as reflected in the book’s title, she draws attention to the relational nature of humanity, highlighting its dependence on the construction of animal others. By following the animal into these closed loop circular systems, where we do not even need to bother with eye contact, Pilflod Larsson argues that they inevitably reshape human identity. The animal becomes a gaze-less entity that can be used in meat and vegetable production alike, diffusing the general boundaries between animals and vegetables. As traces of animals in food

production are being erased with the help of AI and smart systems, so is human agency and any sense of responsibility and reason.

As Emelie Pilflod Larsson shows in the last article of this issue, Derrida, in his later works, expands his concept of *hospitality* to address not only the human “other” but also the non-human, particularly animals. This shift in Derrida’s thinking about hospitality invites a broader ethical consideration of how humans relate to non-human animals and challenges anthropocentric views that limit ethical responsibility to human subjects. This piece thus illustrates that not only is the definition and negotiation of non-humanity important for our understanding of hospitality, but is also essential for our construction of *humanity* as well.

As these different pieces have illuminated, doing theory against inequalities, whether social, political or ecological, consequently seems to require an engagement with hospitality, pure and impossible (as Derrida notes in *Of Hospitality*), as this concept also calls for an openness and porousness of the *other*—human and non-human alike—that transcends traditional boundaries and conditions. *Pure hospitality* is in its very nature impossible as it demands an absolute, unconditional welcome that does not rely on preconditions of identity, utility, or familiarity. This impossibility, however, does not render it irrelevant; rather, it transforms it into an ethical horizon that challenges existing structures of power, privilege, and exclusion. By extending this framework to include both humans and non-humans, theory can dismantle human exceptionalism, which reinforces inequalities by privileging human interests over those of animals as well as the environment. The ethical challenge posed by *pure hospitality* forces us to confront inequalities in how we treat refugees, marginalised communities, and animals alike, demanding a rethinking of social justice that refuses to place conditions on who deserves care, rights, or respect. In this way, doing theory against inequalities through the lens of *pure hospitality* not only exposes the limits of existing frameworks of equality but also pushes toward a more radical, inclusive, and ethical vision of justice. As such, the articles included in this special issue provide the initial steps to subsume the impossibilities of *pure hospitality* in theoretical work that (re)negotiates the boundaries and definitions of ethical and political in/equalities in the social sciences, utilizing Derrida’s oeuvre to “do theory” against inequalities, thereby putting Derrida back (in)to political work.

Works Cited

- Carotenuto, Silvana. "Friendship to the Land: The 'Woman Partisan' in Imbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were*." *8th Derrida Today International Conference*, Athens, June 10-14th 2024 (in process of publication).
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*. Routledge, 1994.
- . *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Stanford UP, 2005.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality*. 1999. Stanford UP, 2000.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Edited by Donna Landry, Gayatri Spivak, and Gerald MacLean, Routledge, 1996.
- Nyhlén, Sara, Sara Skott, and Katarina Giritli Nygren. "Haunting the Margins: Excavating EU Migrants as the 'Social Ghosts' of Our Time." *Critical Criminology*, vol. 32, 2024, pp. 479–496.